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Revitalizing South Florida's Ecosystem Benefits the Environment and People

Thanks to the foresight of state legislators in the early 1970s, Florida's regional approach to water management continues to be viewed as a model for other areas of the country. Recognizing that water transcends county and city political lines, the state's five water management districts were created along natural hydrogeologic, or watershed boundaries with oversight by appointed Governing Boards.

Each district is charged with four areas of responsibility: water supply, flood protection, water quality and natural systems. Successfully managing these sometimes conflicting mandates is a daily balancing act for the board members and staff. Working in partnership with other governments, interest groups and the public, water management districts identify and address issues and concerns from a holistic, interconnected ecosystem approach.

The South Florida Water Management District encompasses one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world – stretching from Orlando to the Florida Keys. Found within these 18,000 square miles is the Kissimmee-Okeechobee-Everglades system, made up of a mosaic of habitats and natural communities including lakes and rivers; wetlands, uplands and ridges; and coastal bays, lagoons and estuaries.

Because the slope of this almost flat land is so subtle, flooding was once a constant threat. In response, a series of canals, levees and water control structures were built to help harness and manage surface water flow for the benefit of residents, visiting tourists and farms/businesses. While allowing for tremendous population and economic growth and land development, many of the man-made changes also caused

negative impacts to the natural system.

A healthy ecosystem is integral to our overall quality of life. Without it, life in southern Florida simply would not be what it is today...or tomorrow. Successful revitalization and protection of the ecosystem is critical to our future.

COORDINATED EFFORTS

In southern Florida, natural systems management incorporates a number of wide-ranging projects authorized by Congress and the Florida Legislature designed to achieve a multitude of interrelated objectives and approaches:

- preserve, protect and restore natural habitats (including species diversity/control of exotic plants)
- improve water movement and system operations to better mimic natural flows

- capture and store more freshwater for future use
- improve water quality by managing and treating farm and urban stormwater runoff
- conduct field and laboratory research to optimize restoration efforts
- monitor and assess mercury levels
- develop new/revised regulatory criteria

Combined, these far-reaching federal and state endeavors represent a commitment of \$14.8 billion dollars to the region. The overall scope and complexities are staggering. Considered the largest coordinated ecosystem restoration ever undertaken, the eyes of the world are focused on South Florida. Scientists, engineers, government leaders,

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